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SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE DIALOGUE COMES TO LIFE IN
ISTANBUL, LIVES UP TO ITS NAME

REF: A. ANKARA 0789

[1](#)B. ANKARA 2191

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: A June 20-21 Istanbul symposium within the framework of the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD) focused on "Empowering Women in Public Life and Democratic Development in the BMENA Region." At this first issue-focused DAD activity, nearly 100 NGO and government representatives exchanged experiences and agreed on the need for increased research about regional women's issues, the importance of quotas in increasing women's political participation, and the key roles education and economic empowerment play in fostering women's participation in public life. Participants agreed no religion justifies women holding a lower place in society, but religion is often manipulated to this effect. Event organizers plan to bring the group together again for an event that will result in an action platform for governments to consider. End summary.

[1](#)2. (U) The June 20-21 symposium was jointly organized by the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), a leading Turkish think-tank, and Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The conference agenda focused on three areas: women's participation in political processes and public life, violence and its effect on women, and socio-economic issues.

[1](#)3. (U) Held in Istanbul, the symposium brought together nearly 100 NGO and government representatives from countries including Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, West Bank/Gaza, and Yemen. Also present in their capacity as DAD co-sponsors were representatives of the Turkish, Italian and Yemeni governments and DAD partner NGOs, No Peace Without Justice (Italy) and the Human Rights Information and Training Center (Yemen). NEA DAS Scott Carpenter, two NEA staff members, and a National Endowment for Democracy (NED) representative also attended. Media coverage of the event was positive and straightforward.

Foreign Minister Gul: Reforms Needed

[1](#)4. (U) In his opening address, Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul noted this was the first issue-focused meeting of the Democracy Assistance Dialogue. He underlined Turkey's co-sponsorship of the DAD, and stressed that the initiative reflects the aspirations of people in the region. Gul declared the Middle East is steadily falling behind the rest of the world, and political and economic reforms are needed to turn that around.

Great Minds Think Alike...Most of the time

[1](#)5. (U) There was consensus around many issues at the conference, and agreement that, to a large extent, problems are the same everywhere. Empowerment through legal changes and quotas to increase women's participation in parliament and local government, for example, with few exceptions, were endorsed as vital to women being able to achieve increased political power. All agreed on the need for increased research and study into women's issues. Education and economic empowerment were also stressed as key to increasing women's participation in public life. Participants stressed that financing is needed for activities promoting political participation. All agreed that no religion justifies women holding a lower place in society, but that religion is often manipulated to this effect.

[1](#)6. (U) Despite agreement on the last point, it was clear over the two days that questions of religion affect and are interpreted differently by women in each country. One Turkish participant noted, "On several occasions we have made ourselves 'the other'...some of us say we are feminists, some of us claim we're not; some think our bodies belong to us, some don't believe that." On one panel featuring two Turkish women, one of them wearing a headscarf and the other uncovered, the women agreed that their partnership "must become healthier." The uncovered participant complained that covered women had chosen not to demonstrate in front of Parliament during the women's

movement's lobbying campaign on Turkey's new civil code, which allowed Prime Minister Erdogan to call the demonstrators "marginal." The covered participant claimed that sometimes she felt under pressure from "feminists" and that tolerance was among the most important democratic values.

Sharing Stories: Political Participation

17. (U) Participants related a wide variety of experiences:

-- Rola Dashti, Kuwaiti Defender of Voting Rights and the first chairperson of the Kuwaiti Economic Society spoke about the May 16 decision to allow participation of Kuwaiti women in politics beginning with 2007 elections. (Note: Her presentation coincided with the oath of office of Kuwait's first female Cabinet minister in Kuwait City. End note.) Dashti herself plans to run in the 2007 elections. Those who oppose her, she said, attempt to label her as anti-religious, anti-patriotic, and harmful to family values. She expressed dismay that she is called these things when fighting for her nation's increased prosperity.

-- Amal Basha of the Sister Arab Forum of Yemen noted that there is only one woman MP among 300 men in the Yemeni parliament. She spoke of a culture of fear in Yemen, and encouraged more dialogue between women.

-- Pakistani attendees said they felt years ahead as they heard stories of others. Shahida Jamil, former Pakistani Minister of Justice, commented from the audience on the participation of women in the Pakistani Parliament, where there are general seats open to all and reserved seats based on proportional representation. There were 25 reserved seats for women, but those had lapsed over 10 years, before reserved spots for women were recently reinstated. By law, one-third of the Pakistani local council members should be women; in 2001, 38,000 Pakistani women were elected at the local council level. Three hundred women are in the legislature at the federal and provincial level.

-- A Saudi academic related incremental progress. She stated that since the U.S. had entered Iraq, there had been positive changes, including institutional reforms, less acceptance of radicalism, limited increased avenues for participation, increased visibility of certain issues in state media, and the presence of international media interested in women's issues. She related how Saudi women had asked for the right to actively participate in the country's recent local elections. She stated that Saudi Arabia's election commission "had a hard time with us." Media and public pressure forced it to come out and say publicly that women could not participate, according to this academic, not because it was forbidden by law, but because there was "not enough time to arrange things, including segregation." This procedural argument, she said, was easier to contest than legal or religious objections. Speaking more generally, she explained that NGOs as we know them do not exist in Saudi Arabia. In 2000 Saudi Arabia signed the CEDAW, she added, but not one article had been implemented to date. "International agreements are of no use to us," she said, asserting that the U.N. had not demanded reports on the condition of women in Saudi Arabia.

Sharing Stories: Violence and Socio-Economic Issues

18. (U) In the panel addressing violence, Fatma Khafagy, Ombudsman for Violence against Women in Cairo, said one-third of Egyptian women are affected by violence and that a strategy must be developed to prevent this. Nebahat Akkoc of Turkish NGO KAMER described the foundation of the organization in the Kurdish-majority city of Diyarbakir and outlined KAMER's main goals: a job for every woman and effective assistance to women about how to resist violence. KAMER is especially active in fighting so-called "honor killings" in southeast Turkey, and is one of the few independent civil society groups in that region.

19. (U) A representative of the Revolutionary Association of the Women in Afghanistan claimed life has not changed for many Afghan women since the fall of the Taliban, with violence against women continuing. The following day, however, another Afghan participant acknowledged that while things are not perfect, many things have changed for the better. "Four years ago I wouldn't have attended this conference as I would have been scared to death," she said. A lively discussion followed the panel on violence, featuring a question about the relation of democracy to domestic violence, with a participant doubting there was less domestic violence in democratic countries. Several women also mentioned female circumcision in their remarks, pointing out that men are not the only perpetrators of

violence against women.

10. (U) On the socio-economic panel, a Yemeni NGO leader described how her organization has contributed to girls' education in a country where 67 percent of women are illiterate. An Afghan NGO leader, who also focuses on education, pointed out that five years ago, less than 4000 girls were studying in Afghanistan, and that was only happening in underground schools. Today, she said, 5 million girls were in school there and 3.2 million women voted. She stressed the importance of bringing social change while respecting local traditions, cultures and religion. A Pakistani participant stressed the need to bring the private sector into the DAD format, as the private sector is often helpful in breaking divides and what she called the "politics of polarization." She prioritized the need for personal financial empowerment.

11. (U) Rajaa Khuzai of the National Council for Women in Iraq proclaimed that freedom of speech had come to her country, and thus she had no fear to speak to such a symposium. She highlighted the need to help the large number of widows that had been created by the wars in which Iraq was involved over the past 25 years. She spoke of solidarity among women across the country, illustrating the point with the story of a Basrah request for a shelter spot that was met by "sisters in Iraqi Kurdistan" when a place was not available in Baghdad. She highlighted the need for expanded networks and support systems for activists to share experience. She also highly praised the 25% quota that had been instituted to promote women's participation in the Iraqi assembly, which led to women comprising 31% of its seats.

Emma Bonino: Our Issues Are Not Marginal

12. (U) In her closing remarks, European MP Emma Bonino stressed how she benefited from friends in the north decades ago when she was struggling for increased women's rights in Italy on issues like custody and divorce. Having an international network of supporters lends one confidence and legitimacy, she said, especially when public opinion considers certain women's issues marginal compared to concerns such as poverty and the need for stability. Time has proven that these issues are not marginal, she said. She stressed that while service-based social NGOs are necessary and important, from time to time "you have to go out and vote." Thus she asserted that the DAD should stay focused on political participation and participation in public life. And once women achieve roles in politics and parliament, they must be trained to use their power. She encouraged participants to reach out to one another after the conference, and to do things "with and for" each other.

Regional, Not U.S. Imprint

13. (U) Comment: Per reftel B, some in Turkish civil society planning the conference had initially questioned holding the symposium under the auspices of the DAD, but those doubts were overcome after NGOs learned more of Turkey's role in the DAD. Indeed, outside of three comments on the first day suggesting that the United States must continue to hold to the values it is promoting in the region, there was very little mention at all during the symposium of the U.S., its role in promoting the BMENAI, or its experience with women's political participation. (Note: Bonino did acknowledge the financial support for the conference by the U.S. and the U.K. End note.) The Turkish media at the conference focused almost exclusively on the individual women participants and their stories, resulting in interviews in print and on television of Kuwaiti Rola Dashti, Afghan activist Sahar Saba, and others.

14. (U) Comment, cont'd: Participants were unanimous in their praise for the spirit of the event and the benefits derived from bringing together this network of accomplished leaders in the region. Due to the size of the event and the sheer volume of information that each participant had to share, however, some stressed that the conference was too short, and/or that a format with more and smaller working groups and fewer panels would have been more productive. Nevertheless, participants appreciated the quality and sophistication of their peers. Organizers plan to build on this start by bringing the same group together again in a future activity that will result in an action platform for governments to consider.

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